## SIXTY YEARS AGO

## THE STORY OF THE START by MAJOR REUBEN H. FLEET

As Major J.M.Al, A.S.A., U.S.A., I was Executive Officer for Flying Training in the United States, stationed at Air Service Signal Corps Headquarters, with thirty-four flying fields under my Command. Upon recommendation of Colonel H. H. Arnold, I was appointed Officer in Charge of the Aerial Mail Service, in addition to my other duties. On 6 May, Secretary Baker phoned me to come to his office for conference. I reported the Air Service had no airplanes capable of flying non-stop from Washington to Philadelphia or from Philadelphia to New York, and requested postponement to gain more time than eight days to obtain Curtiss JN6H airplanes with double fuel capacity and with a hopper for mail replacing the front seat and the dual control in these airplanes. Secretary Baker invited Secretary Burleson to his office; Burleson went into a rage over the suggestion for deferment, stating he had already announced to the Press that an Army Aerial Mail Service would get started on 15 May, and that it had to start then, even if war work suffered. Secretary Baker was sympathetic with my recommendation but the fact that the Press had been advised that the Aerial Mail Service would start on 15 May was governing, and the War Department had to do it even if its aviators had to land in meadows enroute and retank with gasoline, oil and maybe water.

Without leaving Secretary Baker's office, I telephoned Colonel E. A. Deeds, A.S.P. (Air Service Production), and requested him to order six JN6Hs from Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Corporation at Garden City, Long Island, New York, which firm was manufacturing trainers for the Army, leaving out the front seat and the front control, and substituting in the front cockpit a hopper to carry mail; also installing in each airplane, double capacity for gasoline and oil, the six airplanes to be delivered to us at Mineola Air Field in eight days.

Curtiss accepted the telephonic order and agreed to have ready the six such airplanes at the sacrifice of suspending delivery of trainers during this period. They proposed to use two regular nineteen gallon gasoline tanks and two regular 2½ gallon oil tanks, hooking together each pair of tanks to double the fuel capacity. The normal range of a Curtiss JN6H airplane trainer with a gasoline tank carrying 19 gallons was 88 miles in one hour and twenty minutes at cruising speed of 66 miles an hour, reduced by head-winds and accelerated by tail winds.

I then telephoned my friend Major August Belmont, 65, in New York City, owner of Belmont Park Race Track on Long Island, and requested permission to use his Park for the aerial mail serving New York City, as the Army did not want to interrupt training of aviators in Mineola.

On 13 May 1918, I went with five other aerial mail pilots (leaving Lieut. Boyle in Washington) to the Curtiss factory at Garden City, where the mail planes were reportedly ready. Mechanics, engineers, and we worked night and day, and on the afternoon of

14 May two airplanes only were flyable. I had personally selected and detailed for the Aerial Mail Service, R.M.A.'s First Lieutenants Howard Paul Culver, Torrey H. Webb, and Walter Miller, and Second Lieutenant Stephen Bonsal and the Post Office Department had requested that Second Lieutenants James Clark Edgerton and George Leroy Boyle be detailed by us for Aerial Mail Service. Edgerton's father was purchasing agent for the Post Office Department; Lieutenant Edgerton had just graduated from Primary instruction as an aviator at Ellington Field. Lieutenant Boyle's father-in-law (to be) was Judge Charles C. McChord, Interstate Commerce Commissioner who had "saved the parcel post for the Post Office Department" against private express companies bidding and fighting in court for the business. The Post Office Department requested that Lieutenant Boyle fly the first aerial mail from Washington, and Lieutenant Edgerton into Washington.

I left Lieutenant Webb in charge at Belmont Park and the Curtiss plant, with Lieutenants Miller and Bonsal helping and in reserve, and instructed Webb to get the other four aerial mail airplanes ready, and fly one from Belmont Park with the aerial mail at eleven the next morning to Bustleton Field, which the Philadelphia postmaster had selected for Philadelphia. Edgerton at Bustleton Field would relieve Lieutenant Webb there and fly on to Washington, while Lieutenant Culver would relay the aerial mail at Bustleton to Belmont Park in New York.

Edgerton, Culver and I left Belmont Race Track for Philadelphia on the afternoon of the 14th. I assigned Culver and Edgerton each an aerial mail plane and I flew an ordinary Jenny trainer without extra fuel tanks because only two aerial mail airplanes were ready by afternoon of 14 May. The weather was frightful; it was so foggy we pilots could not see each other after take-off; the masts of boats in New York Harbor were in fog. I climbed through the fog and came out at 11,000 feet, almost the ceiling of the airplane. I flew by magnetic compass and the sun until I ran out of gasoline and the propeller stopped. I glided in the direction of Philadelphia, and came out of the clouds with 3,000 feet to spare. I selected a farm and landed, buying a five gallon milk can of ordinary gasoline from a farmer. We had lots of trouble pouring it in the gasoline tank without a funnel and without a chamois skin to strain it. Perhaps three gallons got in the airplane and darkness was coming. I inquired where Bustleton was, took off, flew toward it, ran out of gasoline again, and landed in a meadow two miles from Bustleton Field. As no telephone was available, I commandeered a farmer to drive me to Bustleton Field, and sent Culver with aviation gasoline to get the airplane and fly it in.

There were so many things wrong with the airplanes and their motors that we worked all night to get them in better commission; for example, one gas tank had a hole the size of a lead pencil and we had to cork it up with an ordinary bottle cork, as there was no time or facility to repair it. By 8:40 the next morning, one mail machine was flyable and I took it off for Washington, where I landed at 10:35 a.m. at the Polo Field in Potomac Park--the mail was due to start twenty five minutes later.

I had delegated Capt. B. B. Lipsner, A.S.P. (not an aviator), detailed at his request to the Aerial Mail Service by Air Service Production, to have aviation gasoline at the Polo Field in Washington. He failed in his mission and didn't have a drop of gasoline there. We drained gasoline from a British airplane and two other American airplanes that were on the field, and filled therefrom the aerial mail airplane. President Wilson was there with his wife; also Mr. Burleson, Otto Praeger and the Japanese Postmaster General. President Wilson said, "Tomorrow I want to extend this service to Boston." I replied, "Mr. President, please do not order this until we can get the equipment and Personnel." He said, " I want you to come to the White House right after the aerial mail airplane takes off and bring Secretary Baker with you."

On the way with Secretary Baker, I asked him earnestly to oppose extension of the service without our having time to prepare, and explained we had had to neglect war operations to handle the existing aerial mail assignment.

Mr. Baker supported me and no announcement of extension of the Aerial Mail Service to and from Boston was then made to the Press. Boston round-trip service was begun on 6 June 1918.

On 14 May 1918 Congress passed the Overman Act, and, after approving it on 20 May, the President separated the Air Service from the Signal Corps and appointed Major General William L. Kenly (not an aviator) Director of Military Aeronautics, Air Service Aeronautics, U. S. Army.

As there was no aviation field in Washington, we had to use the Polo Field in Potomac Park for take-off and landing. It was surrounded by a race track outside of which was a row of beautiful trees about 30 feet high. Four days before the aerial mail was due to start, I requested permission from the Park Commission to cut down a lone, non-symmetrical, ugly and hazardous tree that was out in the field. They asked when we needed the tree removed and I said, "Three days." They said it would take them three months to act. I went to the field and ordered mechanics to cut down the tree 6 inches below the ground, fill over the stump with cinders, tamp it hard and pull the fallen tree outside the race track. Another obstacle was the bandstand at one end of the field, about which nothing could be done. The lone tree had caused Colonel Culver (no relative of Lieut. Culver) to crash and he had been hospitalized for weeks. Colonel Culver was in charge of our important development of radio.

On 18 May, Secretary Baker directed me to report to his office and asked if I had had a tree cut down at the Polo Grounds at Potomac Park. When I answered "Yes, Sir," Secretary Baker asked if I didn't know one had to have permission from the Park Commission before cutting down a tree in Washington. I told him the Park Commission had said it would take them three months to act, so I acted. I continued, "I didn't ask for this job, Mr. Secretary, I am in charge of training of all army aviators in the United States, with 34 fields operating and students crashing every hour of the day, so if you want me to run this aerial mail job also, leave me alone and I'll run it!" Secretary Baker said, "You know

your business, Fleet -- continue to run it and I'll back you from hell to breakfast."

At 10:45 a.m. on 15 May 1918, Lieut. Boyle's fiance, Miss Margaret McChord, was at Potomac Park Polo Field with an armful of red roses. Even as I strapped my map on his leg and gave him the corrected compass course to Philadelphia, she was there to kiss him goodbye and wave him off. He got lost in the air, landed in a plowed field near Waldorf, Maryland, 25 air miles from takeoff, and over on his back breaking his propeller. He telephoned me at the office of the Second Assistant Postmaster General for instructions. I directed him to bring the mail back to Washington and we sent it by air the next day.

The Post Office Department requested that Lieut. Boyle be given a second chance. On this trip I accompanied him in another airplane 40 miles on the correct compass course, cut my throttle, asked him if he was okeh and could carry on. He yelled back, "I'm okeh." He landed, lost and out of gas, near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, retanked with gasoline and took off for Bustleton Field. He crashed near Philadelphia Country Club without hurting himself, breaking a wing of his plane. He delivered the mail by truck to Philadelphia.

The Post Office Department then requested that "Lieut. Boyle be given a third chance and, if he fails, the Post Office Department will take responsibility for his failure." Relying on Secretary Bakers's statement that he'd back me from "hell to breakfast," I replied, "The request is denied. Lieut. Boyle is relieved of all duty with the Aerial Mail Service and is being sent back to flying school for further training in cross-country flying. If the Post Office Department wishes to place the Aerial Mail Service in proper light before the public, it will take responsibility for Lieut. Boyle's two previous failures; the Chief of the Aerial Mail Service had no voice in Lieut. Boyle's seledtion." R.M.A. Lieut. E. W. Kilgore was selected to replace Boyle.

While the Post Office Department had also requested Lieut. Edgerton, he certainly "made good." He relayed the mail from Philadelphia into Washington the first day, and it was a wonderful feeling to see him land beautifully at Potomac Park Polo Field, bringing the New York and Philadelphia mail in the afternoon of 15 May 1918.

The Post Office Department asked how much postage it should charge. I inquired if the idea was to make the Aerial Mail self-supporting and if there was a limit. Mr. Praeger said, "We want it to stand on its own feet; our limit is 24 cents," which I then recommended. Such a stamp was printed and used on the first aerial mail letters.

The first four days we were filled with mail and then patronage dropped steadily. We carried ordinary mail up to capacity and reduced postage to eight cents and had new eight cent stamps printed. We equipped the terminal post offices with rubber cancellation stamps "Delivered by Aerial Mail," and the Press and business people began to praise us everywhere. It took four days to get all four legs through without failure and then after ten days with a perfect record, we persuaded Secretary Baker to relieve the Army

of Aerial Mail duties, turning over to the Post Office Department temporarily the pilots and mechanics and the airplanes and fields, and Captain B. B. Lipsner, of Air Service Production (no pilot) who requested the detail.

The airplane which Lieut. Webb flew into Bustleton Field and which Lieut. Edgerton relayed to Washington was No. 38278 and that which I flew into Washington from Philadelphia on the morning of the inauguration of the Aerial Mail Service and turned over to Lieut. Boyle was No. 38262. All the aerial mail planes were doped fabric covered as to wings and fuselages, structure being wire-braced. They were open cockpit bi-planes, properly called JN6Hs, each airplane being powered by a Hispano-Suiza 150 horsepower single engine. The front cockpit had a covered hopper for mail, the front seat and dual control having been removed. There were no parachutes; every pilot rode his airplane down to earth on a forced landing. All pilots wore helmets, breeches and leggins, goggles, and leather jackets.

Colonel H. H. Arnold was entirely too busy as Assistant Director of Military Aeronautics, United States Army, to bother with either the Aerial Mail or with the training of aviators. One of his great virtues was that he selected assistants carefully and required them to run their "shows" without questions or assistance. Our country was at war and since Major General William L. Kenly, the Director of Military Aeronautics, was not a flyer, there was lots of work for Colonel Arnold to do with many cablegrams from European fronts and airfields overseas.

There were no maps of much value in existence at the inauguration of the Aerial Mail. Major E. Lester Jones, Chief of our Geodetic Survey, made up maps for us to use. The state maps of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland were all different scales and they showed only political divisions with nothing of a physical nature except cities, towns, rivers, harbors, etc. We had to fold maps of the entire United States in a "strip" to have everything on a uniform scale. Naturally, the maps contained little detail. The magnetic compass was inaccurate and was affected by local metal on the airplane; there were no compass bases to use in compensating each compass. Pilots of this early day had to have a natural sense to fly between given points at a designated hour irrespective of weather. We should, therefore, not criticize Lieut. Boyle too severely for his failures. He simply lacked enough training to do the job and the Air Service could risk no more than two trials to suit the Post Office Department before relieving him for more cross-country instruction.

The whole administration was interested in our experiments and there was no question but that my friend, Colonel Deeds, Air Service Production, was right in recommending that the Aerial Mail Service would be valuable training for our young aviators. Our pilots, however, had had cross-country training and commanded everyone's respect. The Army pilots flew the Aerial Mail for the Post Office from 15 May 1918 to 12 August 1918 when it was taken over by the Post Office Department, I severed my command at the close of the second week, to carry on with other duties.